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ABSTRACT

A city planner's writing is usually not "technical" in the sense that the writing of engineers is technical. In each planning genre, extremely complex information, some of it "technical"--numbers, projections, and so forth--must be communicated clearly. For the professional planner, there are often severe time constraints and the need to proceed quickly while one's mastery of the subject is still incomplete. At the same time, working planners can count on a multiple audience of which at least one faction may be skeptical or even hostile. The writing program for master's degree candidates in city planning at M.I.T., 2 years of core and specialized courses ending in a thesis or client report, attempts to foster quality writing. Every course requires writing. The first semester core course, the Planning Process, requires 8 to 10 pages every 2 or 3 weeks. An illustration of the objectives of the course and the program as a whole is a single writing assignment, which aims to have students take and articulate a strategic stand in a highly uncertain and complex situation. This collaborative writing program has proven to be successful for a number of reasons, among them the course's high visibility among students, its faculty support, the vitality of the students themselves, and shared assumptions between the writing and planning disciplines about the theories of process. Finally, the cooperative writing program is successful through the process of continuing development. Because the program was developed in conjunction with the master's program in city planning, the core course changes radically every few years. (HOD)

TEACHING WRITING IN A PROFESSIONAL DISCIPLINE: "PROCESS" AS A KEY CONCEPT FOR CITY PLANNING

Presented by

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The M.I.T. Writing Program

At the Conference on College Composition and Communication

San Francisco, March 1982

For all good teaching, but especially for the teaching of writing, you have to understand the environment you're teaching in. This includes not only the backgrounds and aspirations of students, but also the interests and values of colleagues and the demands of whatever version of the "real world" is on the other side of the wall. Without empathy with your students and their thought processes and without a detailed awareness of the subtle expectations of their writing context, your teachings--no matter how universal--will not have the impact you want. This article records highlights of my coming to terms with a complex and demanding academic environment within which I wanted to teach writing. It documents not so much a sequence of activities which I recommend to others as an ongoing process of collaborative understanding and work.

Beginnings

Three years ago, as a member of the Writing Program at M.I.T.,[1] I was asked to handle the beginnings of what is now a thriving adjunct writing program for the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. The beginnings were rudimentary--a twelve-inch stack of ten-page essays on "The Objectives of Planned Intervention" which I was asked to evaluate for incoming Masters students in the second week of the fall semester. I'd been teaching writing to Liberal Arts students for 15 years, but I'd had no contact with city planners--how they thought and wrote, who they were. I fought the jargon, emptiness, and confusion in the stack of papers but couldn't get my bearings. I wasn't sure whether the problem was mine or theirs.

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[1] The Writing Program, independent of more traditional literary studies at M.I.T., offers small, intimate courses at many levels for those interested in writing fiction, poetry, and the essay, as well as more technical scientific and engineering writing. It also sponsors an extensive "Cooperative Program" in which writing specialists work in various ways with instructors in the technical departments to evaluate, promote, or instruct in writing skills within their disciplines. Our 1982 CCCC panel introduced the workings of the Cooperative Program in a presentation by James Paradis, its director.

I made an appointment to see the man who had given the assignment and trudged through the dim grid of M.I.T. corridors to the anteroom of the Head of Urban Studies and Planning. It was one of the few times I would not have to wait there in an exciting flux of competing activities. The office door opened onto a soft, gold geometric carpet, wide at the entrance, with pacing space and a cluster of sectional sofas--room for half a dozen people to interact. Opposite stood a wall of books--psychology, linguistics, economics, third world, environment--piled invitingly into the shelves. Deeper into the office a clear, black desk was surrounded by more space. I chose one of the six chairs at the desk and introduced myself: "I couldn't read the papers until I knew a little more about the context," I said.

"I should hope not!" he responded with energy and an open invitation to talk.

It turned out the empty language and lack of detail in the stack of papers was just as distressing to a planning professor as it was to me, and was, in fact, the target of the writing evaluation. But the planning professor had aimed the assignment so students could explore ideas he wanted them to question and develop during the course--which was propitiously named The Planning Process. Excellent pedagogy, I thought; to use an exploratory writing exercise as a first pass at the real learning of the course. But "discovery drafts" (as I call them) shouldn't be evaluated. If students are working in the spirit of the assignment, they're taking major risks with new ideas, so their products will be chaotic. Or, because they know they're being evaluated, they'll back away from these risks and stick with what they think is expected at M.I.T.--and this will probably sound derivative, conventional, "the right line." In either case, their writing will probably lack the pithiness and intent we most respond to in expository writing. This was easy to explain to a planner, and we ended up designing an

exercise for the subsequent year which would serve both our purposes.

I left the office elated and lingered in the wide outer hallway hung with course descriptions, a calendar of speakers and events, and 8 X 10 black and white faculty photos under glass (the Writing Program's were 3 X 5 color snaps with curling edges). I explored the nearby commons room humming with the conversations of an inter-ethnic and international mix of students, against the buzz of traffic outside on Mass. Avenue. I felt good about the place and the collaboration.

Key planning department traits stood out: diverse and interdisciplinary scholarship, a commitment to teaching new ways of thinking, interactive collaboration. Not then, but later, I realized that my need to learn more about the planning environment (like my other instinctive moves later in the collaboration) were the very things that were firmed up and taught as concepts in the planning curriculum. The faculty, I was later to learn, consider themselves neither "technical" (in the M.I.T. sense) nor a "discipline." The MCP students (Masters in City Planning) aim to become practicing planners for whom writing will be a major professional skill. All this was implicit in my first contact but I had no time for further research just then; I had to get busy on the stack of papers.

Over the next three years, a fully defined program evolved from these beginnings. Each Fall I evaluate assigned essays from 60 entering MCP and Ph.D students, providing detailed written feedback and a ranking (I-IV, to indicate who should be seeking immediate help and who is holding her own), and having follow-up consultations with the 30% who have III and IV rankings as well as some 25% more who want to discuss their writing. I also offer a five week credit-bearing writing course as part of the follow-up.

Planners and Their Writing

As the collaboration progressed, a better understanding of planners, curriculum, and planning students gradually unfolded. The nature of planners is much debated even inside the profession. Outside the profession, people see them as remote presences behind glass walls who manipulate information and draw up master plans for zoning, urban renewal, interstate highways, or hotel complexes. But this is a static conception. (The "plan" is here something planum --reduced to a two-dimensional "plane" form.) While so-called "rational models" of planning were once considered effective, the world is now too dynamic for such a detached stance to be effective. Political and economic realities--funding, conflicting interests, noise and air pollution, changing individual and group perceptions or values, even social protest, continue to evolve around any "plan." The planner is in the middle of the turbulence, mediating, negotiating, or advocating as well as designing, managing, regulating, or evaluating. These actions are, in fact, the seven roles of the planner as defined in The Planning Process course I collaborated with at M.I.T. Planning now involves the economic and social policies behind the plan, environmental impacts, working things out with affected people, considering the impacts or side effects, dealing with the ins and outs of funding--in short, continuing to understand and guide the change.

Some planners (including professors at M.I.T.) are practical activists, skilled at work in local communities or in developing countries. Others are more academic and theoretical. M.I.T. planning faculty have titles or degrees in Anthropology, Education, Economics, Psychology, Sociology, Social Policy, Law, Political Science, History, Environmental Design, Civil and Mechanical Engineering, Architecture, and Rural and Regional Development. They joke about their interdisciplinary divergences, yet they often co-author or co-teach across disciplinary lines. Beyond the academic writing they do, and encourage students to

do, planners must write convincingly for community groups, politicians, organizational bureaucrats, other planners, and the public in the world of practice. Genres are reports, memos, proposals, brochures, and newsletters, editorials--as well as analytical academic writing.

This means that planners' writing is usually not "technical," in the sense that the writing of M.I.T. engineers is technical. In each planning genre, extremely complex information, some of it "technical"--numbers, projections, etc.--must be communicated clearly. For professional planners as well as students, there are often severe time constraints and the need to proceed quickly while one's mastery of the subject is still incomplete. At the same time, working planners (like students) can count on a multiple audience of which at least one faction may be skeptical or even hostile. Planners hope to explain, analyze, dream, and convince people with their writing, and to do this under very difficult circumstances. They're very demanding of quality in their own and others' writing.

Planning Curriculum and Students at M.I.T.

The fast-paced MCP curriculum at M.I.T. already attempts to foster this skill: it is two years of core and specialized courses ending in a thesis or client report. Every course requires writing. The Planning Process, the first semester core course around which the writing evaluation and follow-up was originally designed, requires 8-10 pages every two or three weeks. An excellent illustration of the objectives of the course and the program as a whole is this single (perhaps unusually difficult) writing assignment which aims to have students take and articulate a strategic stand in a highly uncertain and complex situation. The assignment is so complex I am hard-put to describe it briefly, so I include it exactly as given by Lawrence E. Susskind, the department head and instructor of Planning Process with whom I have been working. The assignment,

a hypothetical case, came during the part of the course that concentrated on the planner as Evaluator, and raised difficult issues about evaluating data upon which plans are to be based. The case involves a much debated experiment in negative income tax--a subsidy as an alternative to welfare--which most planners don't believe is valid enough to be applied to larger policy-making.

Written Assignment #3: The Income Maintenance Experiment

Assume you are working directly for the Secretary of Health and Human Services. You have been asked to select a research group or consultant to prepare a report for the Secretary defining the New Jersey Graduated Work Incentive Experiment as the basis for shaping national policy.

You have been asked to prepare a brief (7-10 double spaced typed pages) memo to your staff concerning the criteria and procedures for selecting a consulting group with experience in social policy evaluation.

Your job is to explain to your staff what you are looking for. Remember what you want from the consultant is an assessment of the relative usefulness of the New Jersey experiment and similar small scale demonstrations or experiments for purposes of testing and formulating federal policy.

Your memo to the staff should probably include (1) a summary of what the Secretary wants, (2) a list of the specific products or deliverables that the consultant will have to provide, (3) a list of the criteria that the Secretary will probably use as measures of the quality of the report, (4) some of the key questions or issues the Secretary wants answered about the New Jersey Experiment and similar demonstrations, and (5) a description of the methods of analysis or sources of data that ought to be used.

You have a special problem. The Secretary wants a report defending the use of experiments. (There is much criticism from members of Congress who don't feel that small scale experiments can be used as a basis for national policy-making.) In contacting potential consultants, however, you are contacting many of your own professional peers who probably presume that the right way to approach this question is to ask whether the New Jersey Experiment and others like it can indeed be useful. How should the staff handle this problem? Please offer some advice in your memo.

At the heart of the case is a series of embedded dilemmas about the validity of the kind of experimental model the supposed writer's boss wants pushed. In

taking a position, the student is supposed to confront the tension between satisfying the client (the Secretary) and satisfying professional peers.

Viewed as a writing dilemma, the task is no less severe. Imagine yourself performing this writing task: who is your audience? You are writing to subordinates to direct them in writing your message to peers (in consulting firms) who are to write something for your boss which will help her win confirmation for a goal you probably question. (Your more respect-worthy peers will question this goal and perhaps you, if you're not careful.) Thus your message is not really your message because you're writing on behalf of your boss who is the secondary reader for both your memo and your staff's RFP. And her ideas are strongly contested by both your peers (the immediate primary audience) and the ultimate audience of the ultimate writing product--the Congress.

As any "process" oriented writing teacher would see immediately, it requires tremendous art (or craft) to write this kind of memo, even after a situational strategy has been well defined. How does one handle tone and vocabulary? Introductions and transitions? Degree and organization of detail? How does one avoid the garbled messages and wordiness which insecurity and lack of expertise inevitably produce? Incidentally, many students by-passed all these challenges and went straight to the five-part paradigm sandwiched into the middle of the Evaluator assignment. They followed what they saw as five given steps without directly confronting the hidden dilemmas--an example of how an overly technical approach to a writing task may prevent a writer from creative and critical thinking.

Some of the students complained that the assignment was unclearly written. With the exception of the five-part by-pass, I could not agree. It is not the directions that are unclear but the real world situation which they so accurately recreate. I think the assignment is extraordinarily difficult, but its diffi-

culties lie in exactly the uncertainties and variables with which planners must learn to work comfortably.

Who are the students in this non-technical, non-discipline who must face such dilemmas weekly? Forty-five or so entering MCP students take The Planning Process, as may several of the 15 entering Ph.D students or students from special departmental programs for minority activists and mid-career planners from developing countries. Within the MCP group, over 50% are women, and approximately 20% minorities (Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native American). Over 75% have already worked outside in the turbulence of the "real" planning world and may be comfortable with the assignments embedded strategic problems while they may not yet be skillful with the writing dilemmas. Because of the high cost of an M.I.T. education, many continue to work as planners in the real world while they pursue their studies.

Learning Through Experience

This interesting diversity of students has been one of my main resources for learning more about planning; a good part of what I've learned has come from evaluating their papers and talking with them about the relationship between their writing and their work. The experiences on which students draw in their writing reveal a diverse set of planning concerns and aspirations. An Egyptian architect/planner writes on the cultural constraints faced by foreign planners in her country. A Salvadoran economist/planner writes about the devastating effect of U.S. support of the military in his country. A former builder writes on incentives for including affordable housing units in large inner city developments. One woman writes publicity for a battered women's shelter in South Carolina. Another writes fund-raising copy for a self-help housing program in Oakland, California. Yet another writes sophisticated analyses of the multi-

national micro-computer industry. Each one of these people seems to have a deep desire to become more adept at writing: all want a "professional voice" which will do justice to their ideas and make them effective in the world at large. Many say that they cannot remember any other time in their schooling when they were asked to pay systematic attention to their writing.

The interactiveness of the department is a second resource for learning. When I can, I attend colloquia, debates, hockey games, picnics. For a while I belonged to a student women's group; I share an office with the department newsletter editor whose job it is to report what goes on. One by one, I've interacted with faculty--over their students' writing or because their eclectic professional interests overlap with my amateur ones. I visit classes (once audited the entire Planning Process), and sometimes raise my hand in discussion.

In addition, I try to experience what it's like to be a planner. I went on the agenda of a Planning Department meeting to elicit faculty views on student writing. (In planning jargon, this is called the "participation component.") I began a bi-weekly column on writing in the department newsletter, covering practical problems students or faculty identify from my "process" perspective. (For instance, I've covered pronouns, active verbs, and after-the-draft outlines.) It's an interactive column: last month one colleague sent me a copy of my three page piece on prolixity trimmed down to two! Probably most ambitiously, I've co-authored an article with my Planning Process collaborator which describes research on the role of values in Environmental Impact Assessment.[2] (It's a very hard kind of writing: we worked from case studies which involve difficult summaries and streamlined analysis.) In general, I've tried to learn by doing, by following

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[2] Lawrence E. Susskind and Louise Dunlap, "The Importance of Nonobjective Judgements in Environmental Impact Assessments," Environmental Impact Assessment Review, Volume 2, Number 4, December, 1981

my own instincts, guided, when possible, by the reigning tactics of the field.

The Short Writing Course

In addition to evaluating student writing and the widespread interaction I've described, I offer a short intensive writing module which is listed with Urban Studies courses. The course corresponds to other department "methods modules"--math, computerwork, statistics--offering 1/3-1/2 of a semester's credit. In this course, I try to provide an environment where students can concentrate on changing their habits. I aim to have them see new ways of doing things, to change their feelings, attitudes, and repertory of organizing, syntactic, and semantic resources by working over drafts of the writing they are already doing in the program. After the five weeks they'll put these new tactics to work in the writing they'll continue to do. The key awarenesses I want students to develop in the writing course are transaction (how will the writing affect, interact with, a reader?) and process--which I see not in a fixed, step-by-step sense but as an open-ended engagement with the uncertainties of one's own thinking and the situation one is writing of and for. I find writers are not adequately aware of their own processes. I have a generalized process-model which, like the Flower/Hayes model, attempts to explode the step-by-step myth and to offer alternatives. I've found Flower's book (Problem Solving Strategies for Writing) and Elbow's book (Writing with Power) very useful. I also use Lanham's Revising Business Prose and Strunk and White.

Why the Collaborative Program Works

It would be too easy to say the collaborative program works because it's been "planned" and "implemented" well. Its genesis in the open, client-centered model of planning and its high visibility among students (it is mentioned in

frequent mailings, handbooks, newsletters, and talked about by everyone in Urban Studies) do count in its favor, however.

More important is faculty support: writing is important to the Planning faculty precisely because their field is so eclectic. They must constantly be tying things together that don't have easy labels; they are experimenting, building new understandings and concepts in the very verbal domain of human interaction. For themselves as well as their students, writing must organize complex material, articulate a conceptual frame, integrate concrete specific information or evidence or illustration, create an effective transaction, be done quickly under pressure, without blocks, often in strategically tricky situations. Most especially, however--and this is different from what I think is true in the most traditionally "technical" disciplines--a planner's writing must stimulate his or her own creative thinking as well as the imagination of its audience. Planners are visionaries attempting to see things in a new way, and to articulate this vision for others so as to bring about change. Faculty recognize this potential in some of their students' writing, but don't understand what's preventing it for others. Some had tried putting out handbooks--before the collaboration--one on editing and the other a Timothy Gallwey approach to how to complete a thesis. Yet the entire department seems to welcome an "outside specialist" who will give attention to a part of their identity which is so important to them. They make all kinds of attempts to share terminology, approach, and sense of the problem with me and to encourage their students to see me.

Another major source of the program's vitality is the students themselves. Because they are planning students, they realize the importance of communication in their professional lives and have a strong desire to develop the articulateness they associate with effective planning. But because of the kind of calling planning is, they also have a real desire for creative self-expression; many have

dreams and convictions to which they wish to give dramatic voice. While some experience a split between academic writing and their most creative convictions, they're anxious to heal this split. Where poor undergraduate programs have not prepared them to do well (and this is surprisingly frequent and severe, even at M.I.T.), they are determined to take advantage of all opportunities to improve. That the writing program casts students as choice-makers in how much use to make of the resources is a major strength.

"Process" in the Collaborating Disciplines

There's a final reason why the collaboration between writing and planning works, and that's because our two disciplines share some assumptions about process. Since titling my presentation, I've realized that both our disciplines use the concept loosely, as a metaphor which we see differently at different moments and in different situations. My dictionary shows the pattern behind this usage. After the first, root, meaning of the word--a pro-cessus (moving forward), there is a significant, almost binary, split in implication: meaning 2a (a continuous change in time--as a process of growth) vs. meaning 2b (a series of actions "definitely conducing to an end," as in the process of making steel or the legal process). "Process," especially in the more technical disciplines (and the teaching of writing has borrowed from them), has become identified in our minds with "process" 2b, the algorithmn, the finite, step-by-step process we think of in "processing" applications or foods. No matter how many feedback loops we build into our process models for writing, it is difficult for us to capture the essence of process 2a which is exactly that it is continuous (like plant growth) and not finite. In teaching writing, I've found that "process" (2b, finite) is useful only to provide a general awareness of what's involved in "process" 2a.

Planners, I believe, have discovered the same thing. Their whole notion of planning within social and economic flux to affect better living conditions for human beings depends so heavily on continuous input from the environment that the planners' education must directly counteract the common idea that there is a process to follow. In fact, planners often place themselves in opposition to engineers whose problem-solving processes are too finite to be helpful in the more complex and variable human sphere. Perhaps planners see themselves as the human conscience of engineers, standing by with contingency strategies for community development when the "rational" planning process (type 2b) for a highway does not meet with community approval. Rather than any step-by-step procedure, the pedagogy of the Planning Process thus stresses the roles in the continuous growth process which planners must shift among as necessity suggests.

Teaching the writing process in tandem with the Planning Process has provided me with a number of puns deriving from the metaphor. The first one faced me dramatically when I visited class to explain my evaluations of that original stack of papers and found the blackboard already chalked over with diagrams and notations on "The Planner as Evaluator." Other interdisciplinary allusions face me constantly: "planning" itself, "design," "paradigm/model," "dilemma"--all are words of theirs which I like to use in my teaching, either for a laugh or to trigger insight. I've stopped trying to make puns on "process," however. Insofar as there <u>is</u> a dynamic concept of process in the planning field, it is not yet a negotiable or transferable one. I think it means an approach to handling dynamic change through awareness of roles and values. But, because they're still attached to the less dynamic version (2b, legal process), it's a concept planning students can't be relied on to have fully grasped yet.

In following our theories of process, we two fields share a great deal: like planners, writing teachers and writers are trying to create something out of the

flux of available material. We're trying to create it to help (or please) others. We're using it to develop our own creative thinking or vision. We're trying to change both things themselves and human perceptions of these things. We can't teach people an infallible algorithmic process for dealing with the uncertainties of either the planning or the writing situations; we can only teach awareness of the roles and values and strategies that go to make up this process.

Continuing Development

The best illustration of open-ended process is the development of the cooperative writing program itself. Even as I write this, major changes are occuring, especially because the program has been developed in conjunction with the MCP core--and everyone involved in Planning at M.I.T. knows that the core changes radically every few years. Just before leaving to read this paper, I was invited to one of the two weekly 2-hour meetings of the faculty/student Core Revision Committee--which was deeply involved in process 2a. The Urban Historian, the Marxist Economist, the Education and metaphor specialist, and the Environmental Designer sat around a huge round wood table, with as many students, for a thorough examination of the syllabi of the four courses which are to compose a new core. The new package will have more productive overlap, less overload, more collective learning experiences, and a more integrated role for writing instruction. In the process, The Planning Process course described in this paper has been merged with another course; its essential "role" concept has been shifted to another place in the curriculum--some small group meetings where students will explore values, roles, and strategies by interacting and writing about them! The faculty wants help in this new pedagogy. Exciting! Most significant, the original idea of writing evaluation seems to be withering away. Students want a "specialist" to give feedback on their writing, and they want two or three times as much of it.

And they say they will use this feedback better if they do not have to face the already intimidating "ranking" of their work. These changes mean more administrative and design work for me (and more funding); they also mean that the Cooperative Writing Program has already been successful in the Planning Department and may be even more so in its future shape.